



## TOWN OF PEACE RIVER Briefing Document

**Presenter:** Mayor and Council, Town of Peace River

**Topic:** GST Audit Review

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### **Background**

On March 4, 2019 the Town of Peace River underwent our routine GST/PSB (Public Service Body) Audit. The Town's previous audit was conducted in 2011.

On May 3, Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) released their results which assessed GST on "a supply of a right to enter, to have access to, or to use property of the government, municipality, or other body". CRA ruled that the "town supplied a right to use the municipal property to other municipalities through the use of cost-sharing agreements." The amount of the reassessment was \$609,571.41.

To be clear: the cost-sharing agreements in question have been in place since at least 2002. The specific agreement examined in 2019 was the same agreement in place during the audit in 2011. However, in the recent audit, CRA reinterpreted the questions of 'supply', 'public purpose' and 'third party benefit' with respect to cost-sharing agreements.

Town of Peace River facilities have a flat payment scale which does not discriminate on the basis of residence. No passes, rights of use or access are provided as a result of these contributions and the agreements are specifically worded towards regional benefit.

### Appeal and Review

The Town appealed the initial ruling and on July 16, we were told the ruling was upheld. Interest on the outstanding amount has been accruing since April 25, and on July 22, the Town was been notified by CRA that the case has proceeded to collections. On direction from our Council, the Town will be continuing the appeal process with CRA. This could take up to a year.

### Concerns

This ruling – a reinterpreting of CRA bulletin on GST for Grants and Subsidies - has set a number of precedents which will be problematic for municipalities:

1. An auditor is now permitted to 'parse' an existing agreement to justify a finding even if the remainder of the agreement contradicts that finding.
2. Municipalities are no longer able to rely on the GST/HST Technical Information Bulletin B-067 with respect to determining supply as it relates to on-going programs of financial support.
3. It is no longer clear which cost-share items may be now assessed as supply. Furthermore, transactions not contained within the cost-share agreement are being assessed as though they were. Examples drawn from the Town's case include:
  - a. A \$3000 contribution to Canada Day Fireworks. This item is not part of the cost sharing agreement and no direct benefit was provided to the grantor.

- b. \$4000 in contributions to the Healthcare Attraction and Retention Committee. Again, not part of any cost-sharing agreement and any supply provided by this group falls within the public interest.
  - c. 50% of the salary of an RCMP Liaison Officer – not subject to any cost sharing agreement.
  - d. \$8,000,000 in donations to the capital costs of constructing a new regional multiplex. In addition to not being subject to the cost-share agreement, the contributions did not confer a supply of access to any property or service made by the municipality. This item was the most frustrating (and most costly) as the Town has been requesting funding for four years and the only time the Federal government acknowledged this project was to tax it.
4. The required ICF Agreements will now have to include a tax provision. Given the lack of consistency in how the regulation is being applied, this could prove extremely challenging in terms of determining which services should be considered supply. Municipalities must be prepared to have a future auditor reinterpret the agreements yet again. The cost of reversing any collection or remitting will create a substantial economic burden.

Our Council has passed the following Motions:

*MOTION-19-07-261 Councillor Good moved that the Town contact AUMA and FCM to get legal advice and proceed as recommended.*

*MOTION CARRIED*

*MOTION-19-07-262 Councillor Needham moved that the Town consider undertaking some political advocacy work to raise awareness of the issue both Federally and Provincially across all party lines.*

*MOTION CARRIED*

#### Action

The Town has submitted this issue to FCM, AUMA, NADC, RMA, and Municipal Affairs. All of these bodies are extremely concerned about the precedent represented in this ruling. FCM is seeking an independent legal review of the issue and is considering intervenor status. AUMA is assisting the Town in preparing an Emergency Resolution to be presented in September.

In addition, the Town is actively engaging Provincial and Federal officials as well as prospective Federal candidates on this matter.



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THE TOWN OF PEACE RIVER